

CAPT. GEORGE W. O'BRIEN: A TORCHBEARER OF OUR TEXAS CIVILIZATION

By W. T. Block

Reprinted from **Beaumont** ENTERPRISE, November 9, 1980, p. 11-C.

Upon entering the main gate of Magnolia Cemetery at **Beaumont**, Texas, and driving a short distance beyond the cemetery office, one quickly encounters a very tall and quite impressive marble obelisk tombstone bearing the inscription of "George Washington O'Brien." Immediately, the towering oak tree that until recently divided a portion of Riverside Drive comes to mind and each in its own way is, or was, a monument to one of the torch bearers of the East Texas civilization.

Call him "Mr. Democrat" or "Mr. **Beaumont**," he could have earned or worn either title with ease through a lifetime of public service to his community and his political party. During nearly sixty years of residence in the "sawdust city" of the Neches, he had seen **Beaumont** grow from a dozen log cabins on his first visit there in 1849 to about 25,000

persons by the year of his death.

Born near Abbeville, Louisiana, on May 28, 1833, G. W. O'Brien was the only child of his father's (George Bryan's) second marriage and apparently was reared by a near kinsman of his mother until 1849, when he first came to **Beaumont** in search of his father. The original spelling of the Irish family name was "O'Bryan," but the father dropped the "O" from his surname. About 1868, the son altered the spelling to O'Brien.

George Bryan came to Jefferson County on July 4, 1839, and was soon awarded a land grant of 640 acres by the county's Board of Land Commissioners. In June, 1840, he married Nancy Millard, a sister of the town's founder, and until May, 1846, he and a brother-in-law, Sidney H. Millard, operated the family store, **Beaumont's** first, founded in July, 1835. Bryan then moved to Galveston, where he opened a boarding house, and in 1847 established the Bolivar and Sabine Pass Stage Line. He died there in 1856.

Shortly after his arrival in **Beaumont**, young O'Brien acquired his first employment as the Galveston to **Beaumont** mail rider. Since his father's stage would be carrying the Sabine mail once weekly anyway, the **Beaumont** route was probably just an extension, with young George mounting his horse at High Island and continuing on to **Beaumont**.

"When I left for Bolivar Point, Galveston County, in 1849," O'Brien wrote in memoirs published in the **Beaumont** ENTERPRISE of April 16, 1905, "I remember very distinctly of seeing great herds of deer on that trip. I suppose there were at least 500 in one herd. I returned to **Beaumont** in 1852.....I have resided here in this city for fifty years next November."

In 1854, he won election as county and district clerk, and until the advent of the Civil War, most of the archival records of Jefferson County were in his distinctive script. In 1858 he was reelected to two offices, as well as to the office of justice of the peace. During the early years of the county, dual office holding was permitted in most instances due to the small amount of work and revenue that some early county offices generated. In May, 1861, at the beginning of the war, he was admitted to the legal bar of **Judge** J. R. Maxey of the Fifth Judicial District of East Texas, his legal practice being postponed, however, until the war ended.

In July, 1854, O'Brien married Sarah E. Rowley and began his half-century of residence beside the Neches River, at 1284 Orleans Street, a site which is now a part of the dock area. Four daughters and a son were the progeny of that marriage. Following Sarah O'Brien's death in 1872, he married Ellen Chenault, the sister of his law partner, Stephen Chenault of Orange, and he fathered an additional two sons.

When the succession movement reached the county's voting polls in February, 1861, O'Brien was one of sixteen voters in Jefferson County who opposed the ordinance. Nevertheless, he bowed to the will of the majority, and the following May, just as he was admitted to practice law, he enlisted in Company F, 5th Texas Infantry of General Hood's Brigade, which was commanded by a cousin, Capt. King Bryan of Lynchburg, Texas.

Other early Beaumonters of this company included A. N. Vaughan, William A. Fletcher, and Jeff Chaison. A few months after arriving in Virginia, O'Brien contracted measles, and after a near bout with death, he was discharged because of ill health in December, 1861.

O'Brien returned to **Beaumont**, and after his complete recovery, he mustered Company E, comprised principally of early Beaumonters, in March, 1862, and was soon elected its captain. The new unit was soon assigned to Likens' 6th Battalion at Sabine Pass, which the following June, became Col. A. W. Spaight's 11th Texas Battalion of Volunteers, a mixed unit of six cavalry, artillery, and infantry companies.

Company E's most memorable experience came between June and November, 1863, during a Louisiana campaign under General Richard Taylor. There they fought a number of offensive and defensive battles and skirmishes against an invading army advancing along the Bayou Teche, the most important engagement being the Battle of Fordoche Bayou, fought on September 29, 1863, resulting in 500 casualties among the Union regiments. Three Beaumonters of Company E, Samuel McKee, John Andrew McFaddin, and John A. Willis, were killed in that battle, and a number of others wounded. O'Brien kept a pocket diary and a daily record, lasting eight months, of that Louisiana campaign. It has since been published in *SOUTHWESTERN HISTORICAL QUARTERLY* and in hard cover as *THE DIARY OF CAPTAIN GEORGE W. O'BRIEN*.

Company E's last combat experience was at the Battle of Calcasieu Pass, Louisiana, on May 6, 1864, when the Union gunboats "Wave" and "Granite City" were captured in the horseshoe bend of the Calcasieu River at Cameron, Louisiana. Thereafter, Captain O'Brien and his men were in garrison at Sabine Pass and Fort Griffin until discharged at **Beaumont** on May 24, 1865. Captain O'Brien renewed his oath of allegiance and was paroled on July 14, 1865.

With the economy of Texas in utter chaos, he used every means at his disposal to support his family. And for a few months in 1865, he engaged in cypress shingle making, a hand operation, for **Beaumont** was occupied by Union black soldiers, no county offices were filled during that year, and there was no law practice to be had. In fact, until the 1880s, O'Brien could not support his family through law practice alone, and he engaged in many pursuits, included newspaper publishing and real estate, to make a living on the sparsely-settled frontier.

From 1866 until 1873, O'Brien's law partner was J. B. Likens, his former commandant of the 6th Battalion. From the beginning, real estate sales and speculation was an integral part of their business, with Likens maintaining the Galveston office of the partnership following his removal to that city.

During the district court sessions in the neighboring counties, O'Brien often spent many weeks away from his family, for there was usually no other means of travel except steamboat or horseback. After his second marriage, he began a new partnership with his brother-in-law, Stephen Chenault of Orange, who was also a steamboat owner and part-time captain.

During the Reconstruction years prior to 1876, O'Brien was vehemently opposed to the Radical Republican machine of Gov. E. J. Davis, which was then in power in Austin. Along with W. F. McClanahan, a publisher of Sabine Pass, the old Rebel became a spokesman for the "New Democracy" in Southeast Texas. In 1872, O'Brien was a delegate to the National Democratic Convention, a fact that the Galveston NEWS made note of when he arrived there on his return journey.

To give full vent to his political views, he purchased the press and type of the defunct Liberty GAZETTE in 1869, moved them to **Beaumont**, and began publishing the NECHES VALLEY NEWS as the new voice of the Democratic party. McClanahan was the publisher of the Sabine Pass BEACON, and thereafter the malfeasance of the E. J. Davis administration drew caustic condemnation in both papers.

In 1872, the publishers combined both papers into the **Beaumont** NEWS-BEACON, which continued the former policies until 1876, when O'Brien sold out to John S. Swope, the unsuccessful printer of the **Beaumont** LUMBERMAN. When the latter newspaper folded in October, 1880, O'Brien foreclosed on an unpaid lien and soon after, sold the press and equipment to John W. Leonard, who founded The Enterprise Company.

Although winning statewide stature and the admiration of the Texas Democratic Party, O'Brien consistently refused to allow his name to be placed in nomination at conventions. Only once after 1860 did he bow to popular demand and run for office, preferring instead the role of small town politician and lawyer. He served one additional term as district attorney from 1874 to 1876. In 1884, he could have had the Democratic nomination for congressman from East Texas for the asking, but again he steadfastly refused the pleas of his political associates.

In 1880, he founded the law firm of O'Brien, John and O'Brien, that he was to remain associated with until his death. A. S. John was a popular, young attorney from Galveston, who married O'Brien's daughter Emma on June 26, 1884. John also served at that moment as **Beaumont's** mayor. Another member of the firm was W. F. Gilbert, who handled the real estate rentals and sales department. Following his graduation from law school in 1886, young George Cave O'Brien, the oldest son, became the firm's junior partner. Eventually, I. R. Bordages replaced John after the latter's death.

Captain O'Brien was a participant in every worthwhile cause in early-day **Beaumont**. As far back as 1858, he was a member of the county's first Board of School Examiners for certifying teachers. In 1879 he was president of the first school board of the old **Beaumont** Academy. He was a founder and steward of the First Methodist Church. He was a perennial officer, serving in every capacity from worshipful master, of Lodge 286 of the Masonic order. He was attorney for numerous sawmills and railroads, was a founder and investor in the first electric light and traction companies, and was an exponent of deep water to **Beaumont** from its beginnings in 1889. He contributed liberally of his time and wealth to other benevolent causes as well.

Being one of the few believers in the petroleum prophecies of Pattillo Higgins of

Beaumont, O'Brien joined the latter, George W. Carroll, and J. F. Lanier in the organization of the Gladys City Oil, Gas, and Manufacturing Company in 1892. And although the unsuccessful drilling of oil wells in 1893 and 1896 spawned a new generation of unbelievers in Higgins' prophecies, O'Brien remained steadfast in his conviction that oil existed at Spindletop Hill. In September, 1862, while many of his troops were stricken with yellow fever at Camp Spindletop, he was one of the first men to observe the petroleum splotches floating on the Spindletop springs or hear the hiss or see the blue flame of the methane gas escaping through the cracks in the earth. After 1901, his success in oil properties, leases, and various oil stocks made him modestly wealthy, enabling him to retire.

O'Brien's newspaper memoirs of April, 1905, are especially notable for the volume of early **Beaumont** history that they contain, as follows:

"I have a vivid recollection of the oil jail in **Beaumont**. It was a two-story log structure with a trap door and a padlock underneath and below. Chris Yocum, charged with robbery and murder, was captured and brought to the old jail {the old criminal docket book says on January 15, 1842}. He was found the next morning after his incarceration, suspended by the neck with a rope on the courthouse lawn, with a ten-penny nail driven into the top of his head in the brain. It was never known who was responsible for his death, but it was supposed the Regulators had something to do with it."

"In the old jail, the prisoners occupied the upper story, and the guards were beneath. The Regulators infested the whole of this part of the country in those days, and they attempted to regulate everything. The Moderators were formed to oppose the Regulators, and in the course of time, they succeeded. The captain of the Regulators was killed at a place only a short distance from where I now live"

"I can remember," he added, "some of the leading citizens of **Beaumont** between 1849 and 1854. They were Dr. D. J. O. Millard, Col. Henry Millard, having recently died; W. P. Herring, John J. Herring, Worthy Patridge, David E. Lawhon, J. B. Langham, Cave Johnson, William McFaddin, T. J. Lewis, William Lewis, Alexander Calder, Joseph Hebert, Eli Andrus, James Chessher, Christian Hillebrandt, Sam Lee, George Block (the writer's great grandfather), Richard West, James Myers, John K. Robertson, J. P. Pulsifer and F. W. Osbourne."

After having lived 76 years of an eventful and very productive life, the old Confederate veteran expired on June 30, 1909. He was buried in the cemetery he had helped to found, mourned by a host of business and ex-Confederate friends, and honored by the entire Masonic fraternity of **Beaumont**.

Two of his sons also lived out long and useful lives in the "sawdust city." George Cave O'Brien often defended the unpopular cases that other lawyers shunned, believing that every man, however malicious, was entitled to a proper defense. He served several terms in the state legislature, and from 1923 until his retirement in 1941, was **judge** of the 58th Judicial District Court.

Chenault O'Brien, another son, was also a popular member of the Jefferson County bar. In 1898, he led **Beaumont's** Company D, of the Third Texas Infantry, during the Spanish-American War. He also carefully preserved the old diary, many copies of **Beaumont's** earliest newspapers before 1880, and the personal papers of the old Rebel captain, all of which were passed on to the possession of a grandson and **Beaumont** attorney, Chilton O'Brien (now deceased).

In October, 1880, G. W. O'Brien chose to sell his printing establishment to John Leonard, and thus unwittingly contributed toward the creation of **Beaumont's** oldest newspaper and continuously-operated company. On July 9, 1881, nine months after the sale, Leonard placed a news item in the ENTERPRISE which probably went unnoticed at the time. The Enterprise Company had just paid off its first financial encumbrance, a \$600 note to Captain O'Brien for its first printing press and type. While no single action can account for the success of a century-old firm, the day that O'Brien returned the lien, marked "Paid In Full," was the day that The Enterprise Company took its first step in the direction of solid fiscal stability.

Sources: Principally obituaries of July 1, 1909; and Ragan (ed.), THE DIARY OF CAPT. G. W. O'BRIEN.
